

Living As If

A Sermon Preached by the
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December 2, 2007, First Sunday in Advent
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Isaiah 2:15

Matthew 24:36-44

It sometimes seems that I have spent an enormous amount of time waiting. I have waited in doctors' offices and hospital waiting rooms. I have waited in ticket lines and security lines. I have waited for babies, for soccer practices that ran late and dawdling children. I have waited on tables, waited for the other shoe to drop and waited up for teenagers. If it were somehow possible to recover all the hours I've spent waiting, I could probably add several years to my life! And I know that you have probably done the same.

I would like to think that, after all this waiting, I might have become very good at it. That I might have finished an online course in website design, or read all of the great books, or learned a second language. Maybe even a third. That I might have at least learned meditation techniques that lowered my heart rate and put me into a state of tranquility. But the truth is that I'm still not very good at it. My heart rate doesn't go down – instead my blood pressure goes up, and I often find myself becoming frustrated, even angry, with those who keep me waiting, wondering why my time isn't considered at least as important as theirs.

Perhaps it is simply a sign of our times. We are not a culture that waits very well. We have become so used to instant gratification that we are impatient with long lines or busy clerks or being put on hold. And it's only getting worse. Our solution seems to be that whenever we have to wait for any length of time, we bring work with us. We would never dream of sitting around for any length of time without something to keep us busy. And when everyone around us is pulling out their laptops, my guess is that most of us would be slightly uncomfortable spending our waiting time in silent reflection or prayer. At the very least, we always have a book or our knitting handy.

Last week, while we were in California visiting the new grandbaby, I was unexpectedly blessed with a lesson in the fine art of waiting. It was late afternoon, my daughter-in-law had gone to take a nap, my son and husband

were off to run errands, and I was left on the couch happily holding a sleeping baby. An hour went by, then another. And another. As the afternoon wore into evening, it got darker and darker. The only light in the room was coming from the television, turned to the Discovery channel. I knew that if I stood up to find a light or locate the remote control, the spell would be broken. So I sat in the semi-darkness waiting for someone to come home or waken up, whichever came first. I was betting on someone waking up, since the other two had gone to Home Depot! And it was the most peaceful afternoon I can remember having in years!

Advent is the time when we reset the church clock, when the church calendar summons us to another beginning. And Advent is a time of waiting, of preparing, and of keeping watch. It is also a time of remembering, of going deeper into the darkness of our conscience as well as the darkness of the earth's cycle. There is almost an imperceptible shift in our consciousness right about now. The tendency is to hibernate, especially when Arctic air and snow blows in this early. So we light candles and put up Christmas lights to keep the darkness at bay. And we wait. Advent is a moment suspended in time, filled with tension and darkness, expectation and suspense.

Advent always begins with an apocalyptic text, focusing on the end times, the end of the world as we know it and the beginning of a new world. Perhaps it's a way to plunge us into the darkness of the season, to throw us off balance, to make us catch our breath. But I have to admit that it's still disconcerting to me to walk into the church on the first Sunday in Advent, when there is such a festive atmosphere in the air, with the tree up and the greenery hung, the church decorated with the fruits of the Advent workshop, and then have to open the Scriptures to the Gospel lesson.

Advent always looks in two directions – back to the birth narrative and forward to the second coming. That's part of the tension. If we're waiting for angels and shepherds, wise men and heavenly choruses, we'll have to wait a little longer because we don't get them in the Gospel lesson.

What we get today is a reminder of the flood that covered the earth and took all of creation with it except for those that Noah managed to get on the ark. In the Matthew text, two are in the field, one will be taken, one will be left. Two are grinding flour, one will be taken, one will be left. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

And if that's not enough to keep you awake, go back and read what immediately precedes what we read this morning, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken." Is it any wonder, then, that we rush

headlong toward Christmas by way of the mall, on our way to the promised peace of a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, hoping to somehow bypass or escape the waiting time?

The contemporary theologian Henri Nouwen, who died several years ago, wrote that in our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. He believed that people are afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, afraid of the future. Nouwen went on to say this: “Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid, we want to get away from where we are The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.”

I wonder, too, if we have such a hard time waiting because we don’t understand what it means to live in the present, to live in this moment – which is, of course, exactly what Advent compels us to do. To wait patiently, actively, present to the moment. To live within the tension of waiting for the Lord, who has already come. To live as if we knew that the promised realm of God was on the horizon. In other words, to live each day in the present, fully conscious of the world around us and fully attuned to the idea of actively waiting.

Actively waiting demands a certain faithfulness. Pastor and writer Robert Dunham tells the story of the monks in the tiny seventh century monastery at Skellig Michael. “Down in the extreme southwest corner of Ireland, the Dingle Peninsula juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. In the seventh century, that peninsula was the westernmost point in all the known world of Europeans of that time. Just a few miles off the rugged coast, some monks in those days built a monastery at Skellig Michael, a tiny, steep, rocky spit of an island named for the archangel whose trumpet call is to signal the return of the Lord in glory.

“For the better part of seven hundred years the monks and their followers eked out a bare and spare existence, waiting for the return of Christ. They survived countless trials – seven hundred years of trials: loneliness, isolation, frightful weather, and even a ninth-century assault by Vikings, who abducted their abbot and starved him to death. Nothing budged these monks from their rock of vigilance – nothing that is, until monastic reform arrived in Ireland, and less demanding orders of Benedictines and Augustinians began to grow to prominence there. In the thirteenth century, the remaining monks on Skellig Michael got into their little boats and rowed solemnly away from their island outpost forever.

“Writing of their departure, Barbara Brown Taylor observes: No one knows for sure why they left, but it seems entirely possible to me that they

just got tired of waiting. Seven hundred years is a long time to watch the horizon for the coming of the Lord. It is a long time to say your prayers, keep your fasts, and live in disciplined community together, especially when the word reaches you that those on the mainland have made some changes. They are eating better and sleeping later than you are. They have decided they can be in the world a little more without being of it, especially since it looks like they are in for a longer wait than anyone had expected.”¹

Advent calls us to faithfulness, and it is a vivid reminder of God’s faithfulness. Advent hope is about God coming and our getting ready for it. I’m very much aware that contemporary American culture makes it difficult to remember what, or who, we’re waiting for once Thanksgiving is out of the way! I’ve been thinking about how easily our call to faithfulness gets pushed aside once we’re caught up in the Christmas rush. So let’s think for a moment about the faithfulness of actively waiting.

First of all, faithfulness requires that we pay attention to our relationship with God. Advent is a good time to beef up our prayer life. I have no doubt that all of us pray, at one time or another during the day, whether it’s a settled, intentional moment or on the run. But if it’s been more on the run than intentional, it’s probably time to remember how faithfully God waits for us. Turn once again to the familiar Scriptures, find some good Advent devotional reading – an example of which arrived in your mailbox this past week with stories about thanksgiving and faithfulness from the members of this congregation. Read one, and then sit in silence and listen for God’s Word. It will quiet your fears, settle your heart and certainly lower your blood pressure! You’ll probably also sleep better and rest for the Christmas weary is no small gift. You might find that your Advent faithfulness carries over into the new year. If you need a reminder, do what I do and leave one Christmas ornament up somewhere in the house where you will be sure to see it every day, to remind yourself that Christmas is not just one day or one season, but a lifetime of God with us, every day.

Faithfulness also requires that we be present for one another. Being present is more than showing up, although showing up is certainly a good start. It’s so easy to give away Sunday mornings to other, seemingly more urgent activities, both inside and outside these walls. But nothing is more necessary to our spiritual health than being fed in a community that loves us

¹ Robert E. Dunham, *Expecting God’s Surprises: Devotions for the Advent Journey*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp. 43-44. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 108. All quoted by Chandler Stokes, First Presbyterian Church of Oakland, California, December 5, 2004.

and cares about us. You can begin this morning during communion, giving yourself over to the power of that sacramental moment, remembering what an enormous blessing it is to be welcomed to the table. Then take that memory with you and call or visit someone who hasn't been to worship in a while. Did you know that more people come back to church on Christmas Eve than any other worship service during the year, including Easter? There really is something about God with us, Emmanuel, that turns us around and brings us back. And there really is something about a personal invitation from a friend that keeps us here.

Faithfulness means keeping promises. In the short time that I've been here, we've had the privilege of welcoming new members and doing a couple of baptisms. Think about the promises we make as a congregation when a child or an adult is baptized, the commitment we make to our new members. Faithfulness is keeping those promises and commitments, and taking responsibility for the future of this community. We need to talk to our children and teenagers about the importance of keeping promises, making commitments to the financial health of this church as well as the spiritual health of its members. And we need to talk to each other about how we keep those promises, how we model faithfulness to one another, especially to our children and young adults.

Finally, faithfulness demands that we stay awake, that we pay attention to falling stars and the darkening winter sky, that we open our eyes and let them get used to the dark so that we can more clearly see what lies ahead. One writer has suggested that before we can stay awake, perhaps we need to waken up to whatever life is bringing us, both individually and as a community of faith. In her Advent sermon, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds her listeners to "wake up to pain, if that is what is there for you to wake up to, because you cannot be healed until you admit you are hurt; wake up to the love you will not let yourself have because you are so afraid you will lose it; wake up to the future you are so furious about because it is not the one you ordered; wake up to the fact that you are not the master here, just the servant in charge; and while you are at it, wake up to the incredible honor of being given such a job - not down in the basement, but at the front door where you will be the first to see the master when he comes." Our job is to keep awake, "to stay alive to everything that life is bringing us - so we do not miss God when God comes." May it truly be so this Advent season. Amen.